

Williston Walker, Ph.D.

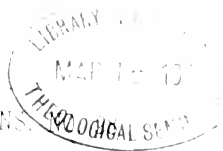
Inaugural Address

Three Years
Of New Zealand's Constitutional
Development

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**Three Phases of New England Congregational
Development**

• INAUGURAL ADDRESS

WILLISTON WALKER, PH.D.

WALDO PROFESSOR OF GERMANIC AND WESTERN CHURCH HISTORY

NOVEMBER 29, 1892

Hartford Seminary Press

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NOVEMBER 29, 1892.

Three hundred years ago this autumn, in the month of September, the first modern Congregational church, which was to be marked by any degree of permanence, completed its organization by the choice of the officers whom its membership believed to be designated in the New Testament. The first re-statement of Congregational principles on English soil was indeed earlier. Robert Browne had gathered his church at Norwich in 1580 or 1581, and had left its exiled fragments in quarrel in Holland a few months later. Before 1592 he had become reconciled to the English ecclesiastical Establishment, and had abandoned the advocacy of a cause for which he had undergone much of obloquy and persecution. But Browne's work bore fruit, directly or indirectly, and by 1587 a congregation was formed at London, united together by a covenant, and possessed of sufficient self-recognition to issue in 1589, through its two leading members, a statement of church polity. It had even performed the churchly act of excommunication; but so closely had its members been imprisoned, that it was not till the autumn of 1592 that a lull in the persecution permitted the much buffeted London church to choose a pastor, teacher, ruling-elders, and deacons. A few months later, in April and May, 1593, the teacher, John Greenwood, and the two most prominent members, Henry Barrowe and John Penry, sealed their devotion to Congregational principles by martyrdom. But since the autumn of 1592 the succession of Congregational churches has continued uninterrupted to the present day. For three centuries Congregationalism has been extending in ever widening circles of influence from the humble beginnings at London.

The anniversary character of the season in which our

gathering to-night takes place makes any apology needless, if apology ever were fitting on the platform of a Congregational Theological Seminary, for devoting the few minutes at our disposal to a glance at one or two of the more conspicuous features of the long story of suffering and achievement which links us to the men who completed their conception of a New Testament church in London three centuries ago, and into the spiritual heritage of whose work we have entered; and, since a selection from the multitudinous themes of profitable contemplation which that history presents is imperatively necessary, I shall ask your attention at this time to the changing emphasis which has been put by our Congregational body, during the three hundred years which have just closed, on doctrine and on polity.

If we follow the course of a river like our own Connecticut, we are impressed by the fact that, while the mighty stream pursues the same general direction, it seldom flows long in the same straight line. Its current shifts from side to side, now bending in the one direction, now in the other; tearing away its banks here and leaving its former channel there; yet, in spite of all these vagrant turnings, aiming at the same ultimate goal and steadily moving onward, as if by an irresistible impulse, to its union with the sea. So it is in the history of the Kingdom of God. Under the guidance of the divine Spirit the church glides strongly onward toward its completion; but its course is fretted by bars of human weakness, and turmoiled by rocks of human passion, and even when flowing most freely, its current seldom moves long in the same direction, but bears now to one side and now to the other, so that to the observer who takes into his view only a brief span of the church's progress, it often appears that its current is reversed, and he almost doubts whether it can be the same stream as that which seemed at an earlier stage of its course to be flowing in quite another direction.

This change of emphasis in the thought of the church, from one age to another, has its most conspicuous illustration in the field of Christian doctrine. The Greek fathers, when our religion was yet a recent faith, devoted their energies to the discussion of the nature and divinity of our Lord. The current ran in that direction. The Latin mind seized by preference on

the nature of man as its theme for investigation, and so forcefully was the current bent from its direction in the earlier discussion that it has hardly lost the impetus to this day. With the Reformation, the burden of emphasis again shifted, and the prime topics of men's thought became the problems of the immediate relation of the believing soul to God, and the extent and seat of authority in matters of faith. And in our own time these questions have, in their turn, sunk into the background, and other problems, involving the nature of inspiration and the composition of the Scriptures, have taken the burden of attention. These mighty shiftings of emphasis, from age to age, are no mere shuttle-cock play of chance, beating blindly in one direction or another. They are parts of an onflowing current. None of them but have their place in its progress. But how various they are, and in how diverse directions they seem to lead!

This fact of variety, from generation to generation, in the aspects of Christian truth which most closely attract men's interest, so conspicuously illustrated in the experience of the church universal, characterizes also the story of Congregationalism during the last three centuries. If we examine the history of the body of which we are members, we shall find that, while it has continued to be marked by the same general traits, its topics of interest and discussion have greatly varied; so that its life up to the present time falls into at least three well-defined periods, distinguished from each other by the relative interest shown in questions of polity and of doctrine.

The first and longest of these periods extends from the beginning of modern Congregationalism to the Great Awakening with which are associated the names of Whitefield and Edwards. During the century and a half of this epoch, the thoughts of Congregationalists were centered primarily upon polity, and doctrinal differences were little felt and little debated. That this was the case was the natural consequence of the circumstances under which Congregationalism arose. That system of church government was the result of a consistent application of the great Reformation principle of the exclusive authority of the Word of God, not only to doctrine, but to polity and Christian life. The early reformers of the first rank, Luther and Zwingli, recognized the desirability of modeling their systems of church

government upon Apostolic example, and seem to have held to a form approaching Congregationalism as the ideal. But, to their thinking, the all-important problem was that of doctrinal reformation, the rescue of the Gospel from its mediaeval perversion; and the excesses and weaknesses of some of their followers inclined them to forego the application of the same test to polity as to doctrine, and to substitute a would-be temporary dependence on the aid of civil powers. Calvin was far more an organizer than they, and was much better able to bring his system of church government to the test of the Scriptures. But even Calvin confessed, on one occasion at least, that an important part of his polity was adopted primarily to meet the exigencies of his position. The fact was that the great reformers were so engrossed in the doctrinal struggle that polity entered but secondarily into their thoughts. Some of the bodies to which the Reformation gave rise, notably the despised Anabaptists, who were objects of persecution on the part of Catholic and Protestant civil authorities alike, tried to make full application of the Reformation test; but the leaders in that great movement stopped far short of any such trial of polity by the standard of God's Word as they demanded in regard to doctrine.

But by the last quarter of the sixteenth century the battle for purity of doctrine had been largely fought to an issue. Europe had divided between the supporters of the Reformation and its opponents on much the same lines that now separate Protestants from Catholics, and men were able, in Protestant countries, to ask whether the work of the Reformation had been as thorough as it ought to be, and whether the test of conformity to revelation which they had made the rule of doctrine was not also applicable to polity. In proportion as it was felt that the doctrinal battle with Rome had been substantially won, men turned to examine problems of church government.

Nowhere was this examination more needed than in England, for in no country of Europe did the Protestant church retain so much of Roman ceremonial and organization. And therefore in no Protestant land was the question of the proper polity of the church so earnestly and fruitfully debated. Two parties in England tried to carry the Reformation test to polity, the one large and conservative, the other small and radical.

The Puritans would have the ceremonies and constitution of the church conformed to the New Testament pattern, but they would wait for the hand of civil authority, moved by the slow process of peaceful agitation, to begin the change. The Separatists would withdraw at once from the English Establishment, and endeavor, without the help of the magistrate, and without waiting until the entire national church was ripe for the change, to form that portion of Christian England, over which their influence extended, immediately and of set purpose in conformity with the pattern which they believed they saw revealed in the Word of God.

The settlers of New England came chiefly from the Puritans, but, thanks to the example of Plymouth and the practical civil and ecclesiastical independence of the colonies from restraint by the mother country, the polity they adopted was that of the Separatists, the most radical and determined of the critics of the Church of England, and the most consistent of all English parties in the application of the Reformation test to church government. Coming from such sources, and representing a tendency which was a logical and necessary consequence of the Reformation, it is no wonder that the interest of the early Congregationalists of New England in church polity was absorbing.

The early New England Congregationalists and their brethren who remained in England were not doctrinal innovators. In common with the great Puritan party at home, the emigrants accepted the general system of faith which Calvin had expounded, which was reproduced in the Articles of the Church of England, and which, down to the introduction of Arminian novelties by the High Church party in the reign of James I., was the practically unquestioned form of belief of the Establishment. It was a plain appreciation of this doctrinal unity that led the Congregational exiles at Leyden to declare to King James in 1617, when they were seeking royal permission for their proposed settlement in America, that :¹—

“To y^e confession of fayth published in y^e name of y^e Church of England & to every artikell thereof wee do wth y^e reformed churches wheer we live & also els where assent wholly.”

And the same unity of belief was strenuously asserted in 1643-4 by the Congregationalists in the Westminster Assembly

¹ *Seven Articles, Art. i. in Coll. N. Y. Hist. Soc., Second Series, III: i. 301.*

in an affirmation to Parliament that they would never have ventured to urge their views of church polity, (to quote their own words):¹

"If in all matters of *Doctrine*, we were not as *Orthodoxe* in our judgements as our brethren [the Presbyterian members of the Assembly] themselves. . . . But it is sufficiently known that in all *points of doctrine* . . . our judgements have still concurred with the greatest part of our brethren, neither do we know wherein we have dissented."

But Presbyterians in those days, as on some more recent occasions, were inclined to cast doubt on the doctrinal soundness of their Congregational brethren; and therefore, to make their agreement in belief doubly evident, the greatest of early New England Synods — that at Cambridge, — heartily approved the doctrinal portions of the just published Westminster Confession, and expressed the desire, in the preface which they caused to be prefixed to the famous Platform, that:²

"Now by this our professed consent & free concurrence with them in all the doctrinalls of religion, wee hope, it may appear to the World, that as wee are a remnant of the people of the same nation with them: so wee are professors of the same common faith, & fellow-heyres of the same common salvation. Yea moreover, as this our profession of the same faith with them, will exempt us (even in their judgmēts) from suspicion of heresy: so (wee trust) it may exempt us in the like sort from suspicion of schism: that though we are forced to dissent from them in matters of church-discipline: Yet our dissent is not taken up out of arrogancy of spirit in our selves."

These statements of representative bodies and leaders of early Congregationalism were reaffirmed by the second and third generation on New England soil, for the preface to the Confession adopted by the Massachusetts churches in 1680, a Confession which they borrowed almost word for word from the Savoy modification of the Westminster declaration, asserted:³

"There have been some who have reflected upon these *New English Churches* for our defect in this matter [of Confession of Faith], as if our Principles were unknown; wheras it is well known, that as to matters of Doctrine we agree with other Reformed churches: Nor was it that, but what concerns Worship and Discipline, that caused our Fathers to come into this wilderness."

Forty years later these words of Increase Mather were repeated by his son Cotton in the *Ratio Disciplina* in the affirmation:⁴

¹ *Apologeticall Narration*, London, 1643, pp. 28, 29.

² *Cambridge Platform*, ed. 1649, p. 2.

³ Preface Conf. 1680, p. v.

⁴ p. 5.

"There is no need of Reporting what is the *Faith* professed by the Churches in *New England*; For every one knows, That they perfectly adhere to the CONFESSION OF FAITH, published by the *Assembly* of Divines at *Westminster*, and afterwards renewed by the *Synod* at the *Savoy*: And received by the Renowned *Kirk* of *Scotland*. The *Doctrinal Articles* of the Church of *England*, also, are more universally held and preached in the Churches of *New England*, than in any Nation; and far more than in *our own* [England]. I cannot learn, That among all the Pastors of Two Hundred Churches, there is *one Arminian*: much less an *Arian*, or a *Gentilist*. . . . It is well known, that the Points peculiar to the Churches of *New England*, are those of their *Church Discipline*."

There were, indeed, a few ripples to break the absolute tranquillity of this early doctrinal calm. The first of New England Synods met in 1637, when the Massachusetts churches were not a decade old, to consider the so-called "Antinomian" views which Mrs. Hutchinson and her husband's brother-in-law, Rev. John Wheelwright, had advanced to the distraction of the Boston church. But their theories, which much resemble those of modern Perfectionists, quickly passed away. The discussion left no permanent traces behind and did not affect the colonies as a whole.

Thirteen years later, William Pynchon, the founder of Springfield, Mass., and one of the few laymen to contribute to theologic literature during the colonial period of New England, set forth a theory of the atonement at variance with the Anselmic view then prevalent in all Puritan thinking. His book, the *Meritorious Price of our Redemption*, anticipated in large measure the conception of Christ's work which the younger Jonathan Edwards was so successfully to advocate, a century and a half later, that it has become known as the "New England theory." But New England was not ripe for such speculations in 1650. The Massachusetts Legislature ordered Pynchon's book to be burned, and appointed Rev. John Norton of Ipswich to make reply. Pynchon was not convinced, but he founded no new school of thinking, and his publication led to no more permanent result than the Hutchinsonian dispute had done.

More generally disturbing to the doctrinal peace of New England in this early period was the incoming of the Quakers and the Baptists. But the Congregationalists seem to have regarded the Quakers as subjects for police restraint rather than theologic argument; and the Baptists, without becoming objects of general controversy, secured a fair degree of tolera-

tion by the close of the first decade of the eighteenth century. Yet neither Quakers nor Baptists succeeded in arousing any special interest in doctrinal discussion, and to the end of the period of New England story with which we have now to do, both bodies remained small and uninfluential.

The comparative fertility of the early New England mind in the realms of doctrine and of polity is well illustrated in the Synods or Councils of the seventeenth century, and the discussions out of which they grew and which flowed from them. The first New England Synod was called, as we have seen, to settle a doctrinal dispute. But the next general meeting of ministers, that at Cambridge in 1643, was occasioned by the advocacy of Presbyterian views at Newbury. In 1646 the Cambridge Synod met, and the result of its work, continued in 1647, and 1648, was the Cambridge Platform, the most elaborate and carefully wrought out statement of Congregational polity which the seventeenth century produced. It was the product of a comparison of three carefully drawn tentative platforms, and was, in parts at least, strenuously debated. But there is no evidence that the Westminster Confession, which the Cambridge Synod approved as a fair statement of the doctrinal beliefs of the New England churches, evoked any general discussion.¹

After the Cambridge Synod, the next events of importance in New England ecclesiastical history were the meeting of the ministerial representatives of Massachusetts and Connecticut at Boston in 1657, and the Synod of Massachusetts churches at the same place in 1662, to consider the so-called half-way covenant question. No problem in early New England history compares with this in keenness of debate, in voluminousness of printed discussion, or in permanency of interest. Division appeared in the Synod itself, and the controversies that ensued racked all the New England colonies and divided ecclesiastical practice. Yet the question was primarily one of church polity. It was not a theory of the nature or work of Christ, or an explanation of the way of salvation, or even a new view of the functions of the church; it was a practical question of the extent of church covenant, and of the relations of those in church covenant to the ordinances and discipline of the church.

¹ Some queries were raised concerning "the doctrine of vocation," but that was all. See *Cambridge Platform*, ed. 1649, p. 2.

Seventeen years later than this half-way covenant Synod, a new assembly of Massachusetts churches was convened to deplore the evils of the time and to devise a remedy. This Reforming Synod of 1679 prepared an elaborate exhortation to the churches, the composition and approval of which took up the greater part of the session of ten days. Such portion of the Synod's time as was not employed in this work was devoted to an assertion that the proper material of a council consisted of representatives of the brethren of the churches as well as of ministers. But it is interesting to note that this Synod felt the desirability of a confession of faith sufficiently to appoint a committee on the subject as the concluding business act of its session, and to designate a time in the spring of 1680 when the Synod itself should reassemble and consider the result of its committee's work. Here, then, was a matter of importance enough, one would suppose, to keep all New England in a ferment of expectation. But far from it, when the Synod met Increase Mather was chosen its moderator, and his son records that :

"He was then Ill, under the Approaches & Beginnings of a *Fever* ; but so Intense was he on the *Business* to be done, that in *Two Days* they dispatch'd it."

Increase Mather himself tells us how this hasty piece of work was performed :

"This Synod, . . . consulted and considered of a Confession of Faith, That which was consented unto by the Elders and Messengers of the *Congregational Churches in England*, who met at the *Savoy* . . . was twice publicly read, examined and approved of."

Twice to read through the Savoy Confession, which is simply a revision of that of Westminster, was task enough for two days. One slight emendation was made by the Synod in a point primarily of church polity, but the whole of those minute and elaborate doctrinal expositions, the revision of the least one of which now causes our Presbyterian friends such laborious days, were accepted as the creed of the Massachusetts churches on two hasty readings.

The final Synod of early New England history was that at Saybrook in 1708. Its purpose was distinctly one having to do with church polity, for the Legislature of Connecticut, which

¹ Parentator, p. 87.

² Preface to Conf., 1680, pp. v, vi.

called it, affirmed that its object was to "consider and agree upon those methods and rules for the management of ecclesiastical discipline which . . . shall be judged agreeable and conformable to the word of God."¹ The elaborateness of the preparation for its sessions by preliminary meetings in each county for the preparation of drafts of church polity, as well as the after-discussions, show that the only interest of importance at Saybrook was that of church-government. Like the Synod of 1680 in Massachusetts, the Saybrook Synod approved the Savoy Confession as a doctrinal standard. But there is no evidence that this Confession caused more discussion than in the Massachusetts body, and in also approving the Heads of Agreement the Saybrook Synod accepted a declaration of the equal sufficiency of the doctrinal parts of the Articles of the Church of England, the Westminster Confession, or Catechisms, and the Savoy Declaration.

Certainly, it is clear, in view of these facts, that the weight of emphasis in the thinking of early New England was on polity, rather than on doctrine.

II. The religious movement of the fifth decade of the eighteenth century, known as the "Great Awakening," ushered in a new epoch in New England thinking,—an epoch in which doctrine rather than polity was chief. Though brief in duration, this revival movement was marked by greater intensity of feeling than any similar outpouring of the divine Spirit that New England has ever seen. The half century which preceded the Awakening had been a time of religious barrenness; the type of piety had been formal, unemotional, largely dependent upon external means of grace. Two generations of men had taken their places in active life, scarcely any of whom had witnessed a revival season; even the ministers, faithful and painstaking as they were as a class, hardly understood at first the signs of the spiritual quickening, so unknown to them was the experience of a general religious interest in the community. This comparative spiritual lethargy of New England was suddenly ended. A premonitory impulse at Northampton in 1735 and 1736 was followed by a general movement from 1740 to 1742, in which, under the preaching of Whitefield, Edwards, the Tennents, Parsons and other evangelists and pastors, perhaps one tenth of

¹ Conn. Rec., v: 51. Strictly speaking, this is said of the preliminary county meetings.

the population of New England was added to the number of professed disciples of Christ. To parallel such a movement at the present time the New England churches would need to receive nearly half a million additions in the course of two or three years.

Such a revival was a momentous fact, and though its ingatherings into the churches ceased almost as abruptly as they had begun and the permanent spiritual fruits were far less than might have been expected, it was productive of important consequences. One consequence was the new impulse which it gave to doctrinal investigation, especially through the leadership of the man whom the revivals made the most prominent of New England ministers, Jonathan Edwards. The Great Awakening first divided New England religious thinking into schools. There had been discussions before, centering about questions more of polity than of doctrine, and of which that regarding the half-way covenant had been chief. But these debates, while productive of division here and there, did not affect the general unity of view in regard to the main doctrines of Christianity and the method of bringing men into the Kingdom of God. When, however, the revival movement had made itself felt, the attitude of good men toward it was various. Some heartily supported the new methods of Christian work, approved the dramatic exhortations of the more prominent evangelists, and insisted on a conscious experience of a change in a man's relations to God as the only proof that a man was truly a Christian. Others felt that the impulse that controlled the meetings was an evanescent enthusiasm, rather than an abiding force, and doubted whether the results of the labors of the itinerant preachers were as permanent as those of the regular ministry; while they held also, that the surest way to become a Christian was to employ the ordinary means of grace with diligence, rather than look for a sudden change in feeling. The party of the revival was nicknamed the "New Lights," its opponents the "Old Lights," and between them New England divided into conservative and progressive schools. Each party had its full share of men of worth, and each had its dangers. If the Old Lights were composed of many men and churches of real piety and sobriety of judgment, there naturally attached themselves to this party, also, those who made little of the divine element in conversion, and exalted the ethical at the ex-

pense of the spiritual. Hence it was that, though the soundness of the Old Light party as a whole is unquestionable, it contained many churches that later developed Unitarian principles. On the other hand, if the New Lights were aggressive and spiritually wide-awake, some of their leaders and churches fell into actual fanaticism, and some from this party passed over to the Baptists or swelled the ranks of the other sects which have shared in our Congregational heritage.

These sharp divisions in regard to the revival movement led to discussion of the principles which underlie all efforts for human salvation; thought was turned, as it had not been directed for a century before in New England, to questions of the ability of man to share in the work of conversion, and to the nature and source of that state of sin which separates man from God. And the leader in these discussions, the father of modern New England theology, was the most prominent of the New Light school. No wonder that the views of Edwards in regard to ability, conversion, and divine sovereignty, coming to men profoundly stirred by the Great Awakening, aroused response and raised up disciples. They became the views of the New Light party. They seemed a new presentation of the old Calvinism, adapted to meet current thought and actively evangelical. Doctrine, for the first time in the history of New England, became the great topic of ministerial discussion; and this new emphasis in the thought of the land continued far into the present century. The spiritual offspring of Edwards, Bellamy, Hopkins, the younger Edwards, Emmons, and their associates, carried on his work, modified and developed the features of his theology, and created a true native divinity, a view of Christian doctrine not simply borrowed from the older reformers, but peculiar in some points to the country of its birth. New conceptions of the atonement, of divine sovereignty, of human ability, or at least conceptions hitherto almost unknown in New England, were presented and widely accepted. Nor was this new interest in Christian doctrine productive of development exclusively in evangelical channels. A criticism, rising to a positive denial, of many of the features of Calvinism became not uncommon. This negative attitude of mind, generally called Arminianism, but differing widely from the positive and revivalistic Arminianism of the Wesleys,

questioned the extent of human depravity, doubted the absolutely authoritative character of the Word of God, and laid stress on morality as the essence rather than the fruit of a Christian life. As the last century turned into the present, this Arminian tendency advanced into full Unitarianism, and a rupture on doctrinal grounds tore the Congregational body into two unequal sections.

This doctrinal ferment turned men's thoughts completely away from polity. The old purpose, to establish a church on the Scripture model, which had brought the early Congregationalists to New England, and which, even if much diminished from its original intensity, had dominated Congregational thinking down to the Great Awakening, had now fully passed away. Likeness in doctrine now seemed a closer bond of union than similarity in church government. The Calvinistic section of the Congregational churches soon felt itself more in sympathy with the Presbyterians of the Middle States than with those of their own polity and lineage whose sympathies were anti-Calvinistic. Ministers passing from regions where Congregationalism was prevalent to sections permeated by Presbyterianism changed their church affiliations as readily as they changed their residences, and Presbyterians coming to New England were as cordially received. The descendants of those who had crossed the ocean to establish what they believed to be the only polity authorized by the Word of God now seemed to believe that polity was a matter of geography rather than principle,—that a church westward of the Hudson ought to be Presbyterian as surely as one east of that dividing stream should be Congregational. This breakdown of distinctions in church government which the fathers had held of importance had many curious illustrations. It affected all the New England States, but most of all Connecticut, which by reason of its Saybrook system of church order and its geographical proximity to the Middle States was sometimes disposed to think itself neither Congregational nor wholly Presbyterian, but a third something better than either. From 1792 onward till the rupture between the Old and New Schools in the Presbyterian body, representatives of the Connecticut churches sat regularly in the Presbyterian General Assembly, and Presbyterian delegates had a part in the General Association of Connecticut. From 1794

these representatives had full power to vote in the meetings to which they were sent. This emphasis placed on doctrinal likeness, and the breaking down of lines drawn on the basis of the polity of which these churches were the historic representatives, led the Hartford North Association, for instance, at a well attended meeting in February, 1799, to vote¹:—

“This Association gives information to all whom it may concern, that the Constitution of the Churches in the State of Connecticut, founded on the common usage, and the confession of faith, heads of agreement, and articles of church discipline, adopted at the earliest period of the Settlement of this State, is not Congregational, but contains the essentials of the church of Scotland, or Presbyterian Church in America. . . . The Churches, therefore, of Connecticut at large and in our districts in particular, are not now and never were from the earliest period of our settlement, Congregational Churches, according to the ideas and forms of Church order contained in the book of discipline called the Cambridge Platform.”

Here, then, was a body of representative ministers so oblivious to their own historic origin as to deny that there had ever existed in Connecticut the form of polity for the establishment of which New England had been settled, and of which the leaders in the occupation of Connecticut had been prominent expounders. But this blindness to the facts of history,—a blindness due primarily to indifference to polity,—was not confined to the Hartford Association. No less representative a body than the General Association of Connecticut appointed a committee at its meeting in 1805 to “publish a new and elegant edition of the ecclesiastical constitution of the Presbyterian church in Connecticut,”—meaning thereby the Saybrook Platform,—a document which, however much it may depart from the early views of Browne or Barrowe, or even Cotton, and Hooker, and the Mathers, is far more Congregational than Presbyterian.

But had this lack of interest in the distinctive features of Congregationalism been confined to such expressions as I have quoted, little harm would have resulted. Unfortunately, they were a sign of a widespread feeling that distinctions in polity, at least between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, were matters of indifference, to be adjusted by convenience and locality. New England theologians drew no sharp distinctions in their instruction in polity; ministers rarely preached on the subject from their pulpits. And the natural willingness

¹ See Walker, *Hist. First Church in Hartford*, Hartford, 1884, p. 358.

of men to coöperate where they feel the distinctions to be unimportant led, in 1801, to the formation of the "Plan of Union" for the joint conduct of Home Missionary enterprises in what were then the new states and territories of the West, but which now constitute the center of our population, states like New York, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. This "Plan of Union," entered into by the Presbyterian General Assembly and the General Association of Connecticut, was intended to be entirely fair to both sides. But in actual practice it worked to the detriment of the Congregationalists, because they were geographically the more remote from the new settlements, and especially because their interest in polity was less than that of the Presbyterians. The result was damaging in the extreme. Estimates are of course conjectural in large degree, but a contemporary observer of the early operation of the "Plan of Union" declared that by 1828 it had given over 600 churches to Presbyterianism, a large proportion of which were Congregational by heritage,¹ and a modern student has affirmed as a result of careful investigation that, during its whole operation, it "transformed over two thousand churches, which were in origin and usages Congregational, into Presbyterian churches."² No wonder a speaker at the Albany Convention of 1852 could say: "they have milked our Congregational cows, but have made nothing but Presbyterian butter and cheese."³

If the "Plan of Union" was the most disastrous result of the lack of emphasis on polity in our second period of Congregational history, it was by no means the only illustration of the break-down of denominational feeling. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Home Missionary Society, and the American College and Education Society all began as channels for the united work of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and the meaningless epithet "American" in the titles of these now thoroughly Congregational organizations is a legacy of the time when men had not enough interest in our polity to give to it institutions of its own.

III. But happily a third period came at last. The swing of

¹ Z. Crocker, *Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church*, New Haven, 1838, p. 144

² A. H. Ross, *Union Efforts*, p. 7.

³ Heman Humphrey, *Proceedings*, p. 70.

the current away from the side of polity gradually ceased. The beginning of this new epoch is not so easy to define as the commencement of the era which we have just considered. No conspicuous movement among the churches, like the Great Awakening, ushered it in. No conspicuous leader like Jonathan Edwards developed a widespread interest in new lines of religious thought. Yet slowly the Congregational body began to wake at last to some sense of its heritage of polity. In spite of "Plans of Union" and general suspicion on the part of the churches of New England, some men planted purely Congregational churches at the West, and the astonished Congregationalism of the East at last perceived that these churches grew and were a credit to our denominational name. One or two pastors in prominent New England pulpits, like Rev. Dr. Leonard Bacon of New Haven; and later, vigorous men beyond her borders, like Rev. Drs. J. P. Thompson of New York, Samuel Wolcott of Ohio, J. M. Sturtevant and W. W. Patton of Illinois, and T. M. Post at St. Louis, saw clearly the distinctive merits of our own polity, felt a pride in its maintenance, and urged its historic, scriptural, and practical claims for acceptance wherever their influence extended. The Presbyterians too, who had heartily joined in the "Plan of Union," but who had never swung so far away from interest in their peculiar polity as Congregationalists had done, aided the dawning of the new denominational self-consciousness in the Congregational body. Their Old School faction grew suspicious of the churches formed under the "Plan of Union," as filled with doctrinal novelties which an undiluted Presbyterianism, it was alleged, might have purged out; and at the meeting of the General Assembly in 1837, which caused the division in Presbyterian ranks between the Old and New Schools, the Old School party formally repudiated the "Plan of Union," and, as far as they could, read the churches of Presbyterian affiliations which had been founded under it out of the Presbyterian fold. Yet, though this action did something to awaken Congregational feeling, it was received by most of the Congregational churches with an apathy now almost inconceivable, but perhaps explainable in part by the eagerness of the exiled New School wing of the Presbyterians to maintain the old relations with the Congregationalists.

As a result of all these influences, the direction of the current

gradually changed. The alteration was slow, but by the beginning of the decade of 1840 to 1850 it was faintly perceptible in the existence of a young Congregational Association in New York, formed six years before (1834), and the successive establishment of similar associations in Iowa in 1840, Michigan in 1842, and Illinois in 1844. Yet it became first clearly manifest, as regards the denomination as a whole, on the assembling of the Albany Convention of 1852. This body, the first gathering representative of American Congregationalism in its entirety which had met since the adjournment of the Synod that framed the Cambridge Platform in 1648, assembled in response to an invitation, sent out by the Association of New York, asking each Congregational church in the United States to be present by pastor and delegate. Called thus, the churches answered willingly, and some 463 representatives from seventeen States gathered in the sessions of the Convention. Its proceedings were understood from the first to have primary reference to the furtherance of denominational interests in the newer parts of our country. In accordance with this mission, and in response to the new interest in Congregational polity of which this Convention was a sign, the assembly voted its disapproval of the "Plan of Union," urged a more intimate acquaintance and a warmer fellowship between the churches of the East and West, and called for \$50,000 (which proved nearly \$62,000 when the response came) for the erection of church edifices in Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, and Minnesota.

From the Albany Convention to the present time the story of Congregationalism has been one of ever deepening and broadening consciousness of its mission and of its right to be. Its real unity has more and more demanded tangible expression. The opportunities afforded by the close of the Civil War led to the call of a National Council which came together at Boston in 1865, and not only considered the exigencies of the hour, but put forth a statement of faith, and a *résumé* of our polity. The manifest usefulness of such an assembly and the favor with which it was received by the churches induced them to take the further step of establishing, in 1871, the Triennial National Council. This body has, indeed, met with slight opposition in some quarters as a possible menace to the independ-

ence of the local churches ; but it has already practically outlived criticism, and its hold upon the churches has strengthened with each recurring session. It has been an organ for the discussion of plans of denominational advancement, it has secured the preparation of a widely accepted statement of faith, composed in the language of living men, and intended to present a consensus of the present belief of our churches ; it has brought about the representation of the churches in some of our once independent benevolent societies, and will in time doubtless make all of them, as they should be, directly responsible to the churches whose benevolences they administer. All this implies a great and healthful increase of interest in the polity of the Congregational body. That polity is no longer a matter of indifference ; it is a real bond of unity. It is no dead system thought out and crystallized in a bygone age. Its essential features are indeed the same as at the beginning, but now, as in the seventeenth century, it is taking on new forms and developing new instrumentalities adapting it to the changing needs of men. The National Council, the representative benevolent societies, the state and county associations and conferences, are as legitimate developments of Congregational polity as the self-governing local church.

Yet while Congregationalists have returned to something of their ancient appreciation of their polity, albeit without so full an assertion of its exclusive scriptural authority as the fathers were wont to make, or so confident an assurance that the New Testament writers intended to lay down any hard and fast system for all ages, they have not turned away from an original and independent interest in Christian doctrine. The stream, to use our frequently repeated figure, seems now to be running fairly straight towards its goal, without great turning to the one side or to the other. It is interesting to observe that the increase in denominational self-consciousness in the Congregational body has been marked by two attempts to restate its doctrinal position. The first of these efforts for a new formulation of its faith was made at the National Council of 1865, and resulted in what is known, by reason of its presentation on the historic graveyard hill-top at Plymouth, as the Burial Hill Declaration. Excellent as this document is as a memorial of the feeling of the hour and place, its rhetorical form, its gener-

ality of statement, and especially its local coloring and exuberance of diction, have rendered it of little service as the statement of faith of individual churches. These limitations of the Burial Hill Declaration were apparent to the National Council, and that body, therefore, at its session of 1880, took measures to do more thoroughly the work which the Declaration of 1865 was designed to accomplish. A committee of twenty-five, as widely representative as possible, in geography and in theologic sympathies, was selected to state the churches' faith. Twenty-two of them united in the result,—usually known as the Commission Creed of 1883. To discuss the merits or defects of that Creed is not our purpose here. No Congregational church is bound to accept it, though a goodly number have done so. It comes with no authority save what it carries in itself. But it was adopted with probably as great a degree of unanimity as would be attainable in any commission similarly representative of any Protestant body in America; and it has given to our Congregational churches what no other American religious community of prominence possesses,—a modern creed, written by living men, and stating the truths of the faith which we profess in the terms of current speech. But the point to which I wish to direct your attention is that these two attempts at a restatement of our doctrinal position show that in the revival of interest in our polity the importance of doctrine has not been overlooked. They witness to the living interest of the Congregational body in the truths of the Gospel we profess, and they manifest the fact also that in doctrine as in polity the two centuries which have elapsed since the Synods of Cambridge and the Savoy have been centuries of growth. While the essential features of the Gospel scheme are the same that the older confessions exhibited, the more recent statements are marked by a wider sympathy and a greater simplicity.

Our review of some of the features of Congregational history conveys its own lesson. It has shown us a story of progress, but of progress accompanied by emphasis first on one department of Christian thought and then on another. In the early period, naturally, perhaps inevitably, interest in polity drew away from original and independent thought in the domain of doctrine. In the second epoch the development of doctrine

was more marked than at any time before or since in New England story, but it was at the expense of a proper regard for our system of church government. As I have said, in the present period, which, judging by the length of the others, we have only just begun, the balance between polity and doctrine has thus far been well maintained. The stream of progress in our denomination inclines neither to one bank or the other. Its onward course comes from the impulse of the Divine Spirit; He alone can direct it to its ultimate goal. But it is within the power of man to increase or diminish its deviations to the one hand or the other. It is our duty as Congregational Christians to maintain the current in its present direction. It is especially the duty of a Theological Seminary to strive to this end. Doctrine and polity should be held in equal view: not doctrine without polity, as has been too frequently the case with us; not polity without much stress upon doctrine, as is the practical usage of some denominations who occupy the land with us; but doctrine and polity side by side as themes of instruction, each treated as important, and each the complement of the other. It should be the aim of a Congregational Seminary to equip the churches with ministers well grounded in the truths which appertain to salvation. It should be its aim also to show them that Congregationalism is something more than custom, that its principles are drawn from the New Testament, and its practices are more accordant than those of any other polity with the genius of the political institutions of our country; that, where intelligence and piety are present, it fosters better than any other system of church government the development of a full-rounded, self-reliant Christian character, and tends to make its adherents what the Gospel intended them to be, free men in Christ. In so far as a Congregational Seminary does this two-fold work it will be true to the lessons of the history of the body to which it belongs, and, what is vastly more important, true also to the Master whose Gospel, if it prescribes no form of church government as essential, nevertheless declares principles which should be the touchstone of all church polity as certainly as His words are the test of all Christian doctrine.



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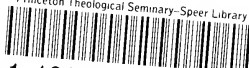


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